

Tom Germond

## It is what it is - and they love it

By TOM GERMOND

Article published on Tuesday, Feb. 15, 2011

This one is for a tireless group of workers who for years have made a difference at Tampa Bay Newspapers and the communities we serve.

I'm talking about our correspondents. They range in age from teenagers to seniors, and they take pride in what they do – whether it's shooting pictures of a sailboat race or writing about a small town government into the wee hours of the morning.

It's not about the money, trust me. Only a few of our stringers ever bring up pay.

The work is tough. Sitting for hours in government meetings, which can be as dull as linoleum, and then cranking out a story to meet the next morning's deadline. Answering editors' questions. Clarifying points, rewriting stories, making phone calls.

Correspondents develop sources and sometimes they put as much time and effort into their stories as a full-time journalist who juggle many tasks – with enthusiasm, fervor.

Who are they? Wayne Ayers and Nancy Ayers, who for many years have covered Madeira Beach, Belleair Bluffs, Redington Shores and numerous other small town governments. Wayne is also an author and is a wealth of information about Pinellas County. Nancy is a skilled photographer.

Another correspondent who worked for TBN long before I came here is Lester Dailey. He covers Clearwater for us, writes features and takes pictures – anything we ask of him. Versatility goes a long way in this business.

Harlan Weikle makes a long commute from Ozona to cover night meetings in Indian Rocks Beach and Belleair. **Jeannie Carlson**, Melissa Lattman, Sallie Palmer, Marie Stempinski – dedicated stringers, one and all.

Jim Layfield takes great nature shots. He has an uncanny ability of getting animals to appear from out of nowhere, such as rattlesnakes and snapping turtles. Jim is a familiar face at high school football games and numerous other events, too. Another good shooter is Wayne Cathel. Love his sunset scenes. Bev Dolezal and Jeff O'Kelley also do nice work.

More than a year ago, I received an e-mail from a teenager who submitted a great shot of a stingray in the shallows. He has been shooting for us since then and doing great work. Branden Bell has a bright future.

Readers also enjoy our longtime outdoor columnists, Ann Weaver, who writes Dolphin Watch, and Tyson Wallerstein, who writes Fish Tales.

Our cartoonist, Dan Smith, is always open to suggestions and has never failed to submit a cartoon every week in the past six years I've been editor here. Dan has won an award in the Florida Press Association's weekly newspaper contest every year since I've known him.

Our weekly columnist, Bob Driver, a former Clearwater Sun editor, spurs a lot of letters to the editor. Through his wit, sarcasm or insight, almost every week he rankles somebody – which is what good columnists do. He has a streak going, too. Never has he failed to provide a weekly column, even if he or his computer have health problems.

Thomas Michalski covered Treasure Island for several months before being hired full time to be the Pinellas Park editor. After many years in that slot, he retired, but still writes and shoots for us when he's not traveling cross-country in his RV and e-mailing us photos of bison, bears or bumpkins.

There you have it. Two, maybe three times a month, I'm approached by people who want to take pictures or write for us. I can usually gauge within a five-minute conversation their level of interest. Some take exception to the pay – "it's not worth my time;" "I'll give it a try, but I'm probably going to want more money."

Without trying to be crass, I explain to them that it is what it is. I even have students asking to work free for me – which is common in our industry – just to get experience. Despite the problems facing our industry, and there are many, we have no shortage of aspiring journalists.

Along those lines, I should point out that for the time being, I'm not actively seeking more stringers. There's only so much work to go around.

I'm deeply humbled to have such a fine crew of correspondents, and I must take this opportunity to pay them the highest compliment I can: they have ink in their blood.

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